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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000284

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SUBJECT: KHUJAND, THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA OF TAJIKISTAN

REF: DUSHANBE 0277

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy
Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Khujand, Tajikistan's "second city," in the Ferghana Valley and separated from Dushanbe by a formidable mountain range, represents what Tajikistan could be - not a democratic paradise, but a confident, relatively progressive, stable society open to new ideas and cautiously resistant to negative ideological pressure. The educated population, well-disposed to the United States, have maintained their dignity in desperate economic circumstances. They are sophisticated, inquisitive, and welcoming. The subtle sense, sometimes oppressive, of authoritarian political correctness that pervades other parts of the western half of Tajikistan, especially around Kulob, but even to a degree in Dushanbe, is much less evident. Even government officials readily speak their minds, and seem relaxed about it. Khujand gives us reason to believe in the Central Asian "corridor of reform." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador, POL/ECON Chief, A/PAO, and a LES support staff visited Khujand February 7-8 and met with journalists, students, development workers, small-business entrepreneurs, and government officials. Alexander the Great founded Khujand two and a half millennia ago as "Alexandria Eskhata," "Further Alexandria," a name that is still recalled in the up-and-coming private Eskhata Bank, which has the youngest executive leadership of any bank in Tajikistan. The peg for the

trip was for the Ambassador to cut the ribbon for a \$4.4 million donation of medicines from Project Hope for hospitals and clinics in Khujand and Soghd Oblast, but the cargo plane was delayed eight hours. The delegation instead toured Bobojon Ghaffurov District Hospital, one of the primary recipients for the Project Hope donation.

13. (C) Khujand, located in the Ferghana Valley, is different from Dushanbe and even more strikingly so from Kulob in Khatlon Oblast in the south. During the Soviet era, Khujand, then known as Leninabad, was the industrial, intellectual, and cultural center of Tajikistan. Khujandis, dignified and restrained in their disappointment at lack of power, look down on the currently dominant Kulobis as less-educated hick thugs, who, nevertheless, currently have a lock on power and, thus, the economy.

14. (C) Although the Khujand authorities provided police escort and protocol minders (the junior protocol officer was likely from the Ministry of Security) for the Ambassador at all times, they made no effort to interfere with the pre-arranged program - a marked contrast to Kulob's authorities who ham-fistedly hijacked the Ambassador's itinerary and intimidated our interlocutors last year. In fact, the senior protocol officer seemed pleased to have someone to listen to his monologues on life in Khujand. He became so enthusiastic about his visitors that he proposed a joint summer vacation, away from all work, at a lake in the valley. The city authorities also inserted a journalist and cameraman from Khujand State TV into all events and meetings. But they, too, were not disruptive, and we judged that a camera in the face at all times was a small price to pay for the wall-to-wall TV coverage of a U.S. visit - and to demonstrate that we had nothing at all to hide during such an official visit.

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15. (C) Khujand is still post-Soviet, post-Civil War poor. Mayor Olimjon Jalolov understands that infrastructure maintenance is essential but made clear he has no funds for it. By example, he told us the city has about 450 kilometers of streets and roads badly in need of repaving, but the budget for that purpose is under \$100K. The city has about 620 high-rise Soviet-era apartment buildings, and about half the roofs are in critical need of repair. And yet, there is more money circulating than just several years ago. We heard that Khujandis last year spent \$21 million on foreign personal vehicles (Mercedes-Benzes on every street), and there is a boom in residential construction, as elsewhere in the country. During an official lunch when the topic of the mushroom growth of mini-mansions came up, one American officer commented, "Especially around Kulob," making reference to the Kulobi dominance of the economy. The Khujandi hosts were delighted, laughed, shook the officer's hand, and offered yet another vodka toast, as happens when someone makes an especially telling point.

16. (SBU) Mayor Jalolov made a rather pro-forma request for the United States to establish joint ventures to get the vast number of idle, decrepit, in fact hopeless, Soviet-era factories back into production. More seriously, he noted that the United States seems to have lost interest in the critical ecological problem of dangerous uranium-tailing sites in the area. The Ambassador assured him the United States has not lost sight of the problem and that we hope for new attention to this issue soon. (NOTE: EmbOffs had already visited the site that week. END NOTE.)

17. (C) The one issue we heard everywhere was the problem of Uzbekistan's strangling visa regime and near blockade of the region. The blockade is not only visas, affecting business and personal travel, but also includes parsimonious provision of annually-agreed Uzbek electricity to Khujand, which harms business activity and makes life generally miserable - a fact we can attest to because the public buildings and private hotels we experienced were frigid.

¶18. (C) By contrast, our interlocutors praised relations with Kyrgyzstan and the ease of crossing the border: "We almost seem like one country. In general, Khujandis look first to Kyrgyzstan for trade and commerce and have little awareness yet of possibilities in Afghanistan. The Anzob Tunnel is scheduled to open in 2006, providing an all-year land route south, but the Khujandis so far seemed to see this mainly as a link to Dushanbe.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador asked at several meetings if the Khujandis thought that Russia would possibly mediate the problems with Uzbekistan, including the harsh visa regime, now that Uzbekistan has joined the Eurasian Economic Community, and now that Tashkent has a "new best friend" relationship with Moscow. Universally, our interlocutors rolled their eyes and made clear they expect no improvement so long as President Karimov remains in power. In one telling comment, when the Ambassador asked why Uzbekistan is so difficult, the response was, "You [the United States] have had only 15 years of problems with Uzbekistan - we've had a thousand years." To the same question, Mayor Jalolov replied he was not prepared with an official response but would be glad to give his personal opinion, which he did and which was far from positive. (COMMENT: That a senior official would readily proffer a personal opinion is further evidence of the remarkable openness of the Khujandis. END COMMENT.)

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¶10. (C) Khujandis know a better way of life is possible. At the Bobojon Ghaffurov District Hospital, an oblast health official asked for the U.S. to provide equipment for endoscopic surgery and the latest technology for cardiovascular micro-surgery. This was in a frighteningly sad bare-bones building that would not stand comparison with early 20th-century U.S. medical facilities. But the medical staff were clearly dedicated to providing the best service with what little they had. The hospital officials were almost embarrassingly insistent on proving to the Ambassador that they were using U.S. medical donations effectively and responsibly and keeping a careful log of every single tablet dispensed.

¶11. (SBU) As almost everywhere in the world, the hope for a better future is with the younger generation. The highlight of our visit was with about 20 FLEX-alumni young people at the American Corner where the city library director and officials from the oblast Ministry of Education warmly welcomed us, and appeared genuinely to enjoy the lively give-and-take between the Ambassador and the gratifyingly well-informed young people.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Academic exchange programs, and the American Corners that provide refuge and support to the young alumni and many others, are the most important and cost-effective U.S. long-term investment we can make to achieve eventual results for our commitment to Transformational Diplomacy. We have asked (reftel) to double the number of American Corners in Tajikistan. The door is still open to us. We really must take advantage of the opportunity while it exists. We do not mean to be alarmist, but we want to point out that Moscow's current policy to dominate its neighbors may eventually close that door to us unless we stay pro-actively engaged. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND